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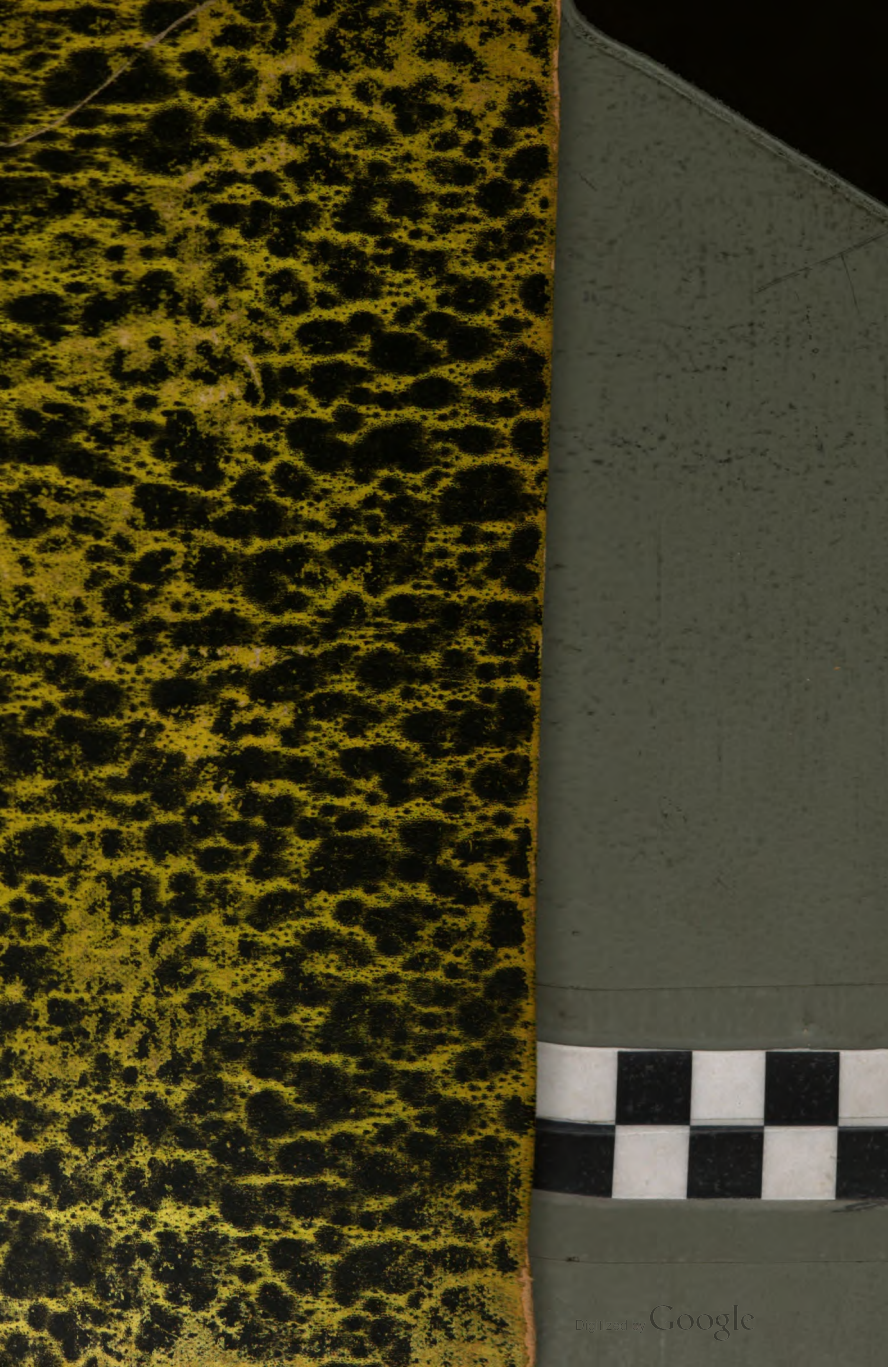
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**1918**





A  
LYCEUM HISTORiette

BY  
JOHN HOLLINGSHEAD  
=

*Inscribed to an Old Friend, SIR HENRY IRVING, 1859-1899*

LONDON  
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1899

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## A LYCEUM HISTORiette.

A SHORT "snippet" history of the Lyceum Theatre would be acceptable at any time; but at the present moment, when the house has just entered upon a new and important stage of its long and chequered career as a Commercial Theatrical Company, whose shares are "quoted" on the Stock Exchange and bought and sold in the open market, a modern boiled-down *Liebig's Essence* of theatrical gossip, prepared for readers who have long lost the old-fashioned gift of leisure and are accustomed to take their sixpenny doses of so-called literature between the stations of the underground railway, should be doubly acceptable. It is not every literary hack who, like myself, has a sixty years' knowledge of his subject, though such a knowledge may possibly cramp his style and somewhat fetter his imagination.

The Lyceum Theatre, more than any other Metropolitan playhouse, is a striking example of theatrical evolution. Some theatres, like its opposite neighbour, the Gaiety, for example, may have sprung into existence at once as a pure and perfect chrysolite; but the Lyceum had to grow and grow, and change and develop, and go through more processes than are imposed by Nature on the common grub that is determined to become a gorgeous butterfly. It began its career as one of those hybrid places of recreative science

opened under a semi-educational mask, the comparatively modern examples of which, now numbered with the things of the past, were the Polytechnic, the Old Adelaide Gallery and the Panopticon. The shell of the Lyceum, which was built nearly on the spot where the Gaety Theatre now stands, before the curved and hilly continuation of Wellington Street was cut through from Waterloo Bridge into Bow Street, was originally intended for the exhibitions of the "Society of Artists"—a Society that sprang out of the Guild of Painter Stainers in Little Trinity Lane, City. On the establishment of the Royal Academy at Somerset House in 1768, the "rooms" were sold to an enterprising tailor in the Strand named Lingham, who let them from time to time for "variety" business. Flockton, the conjurer, was one of the tenants, and introduced a marionette performance called the "Puppet Show." Charles Dibdin followed with a musical entertainment called "Sans Souci"—a name he afterwards gave to his little theatre off Leicester Square. Then a circus manager named Handy, and afterwards Philip Astley, took it for equestrian performances. After this came a mild form of entertainment very popular about the latter end of the last century, called "The Musical Glasses," associated this time with the name of Cartwright. Whenever the managers of these old "variety shows" were "cornered" for the want of an attraction, "The Musical Glasses" appeared in the bill, which accounts for Goldsmith's phrase in "The Vicar of Wakefield"—"Shakespeare, Taste, and the Musical Glasses." "Phantasmagoria"; "Portraits of the living and dead"—in other words, Dramatic Imitations;—the "Phenomenal Prize Ox," removed ("by desire") from the Smithfield Club Fat Cattle Show; Monstrosities and Abortions; the "Porcupine Man" and the "White Negro Girl"; and most of the things that now form the stock-in-trade of an American dime show, but which were then the time-honoured attractions of "Bartle'my Fair," appeared in quick succession. It gave

house-room to old Madame Tussaud—fresh from France with her portrait of Robespierre taken immediately after death—on her road to certain exhibition rooms in Gray's Inn Road, before she settled in Upper Baker Street. Incledon, the great baritone singer and rival of Braham—famous for his splendid piece of musical declamation, "The Storm"—gave a lecture called "A Voyage to India," as a vehicle for songs, and took his farewell of the stage (and Vauxhall) at the same theatre; Collins gave an "Evening Brush"—another entertainment of the Mechanic's Institute order; Bologna, one of the Grimaldi School, gave his "Phantascopia"; and Lloyd his "Astronomical Exhibition." This latter crib from the Royal Institution led the way to an annual two or three weeks of torture at the theatres during Lent—lectures on the "Heavenly bodies," with illuminated orreries, good enough in a schoolroom, but cruelly out of place in a theatre. How many innocent children, unsuspecting country-people, and land-wrecked sailors "out on the spree," have been lured into these gaunt empty playhouses, smelling of escaped gas and stale orange-peel, presenting no curtain and no scenery, and a gaping, empty orchestra like a tank, with no band, but an occasional harmonium, and been jawed to death or idiocy by a pompous gentleman on the yawning stage, dressed like a parson without his gown—a poor substitute for the horn-pipe, the broadsword combat, the hair-breadth escapes of the dramatic hero and heroine, and the rollicking but unprincipled clown, suggested and almost promised by the aforesaid gas and orange-peel.

While these school-board diversions were rampant in one part of the building—a strong contrast to Cross's Menagerie at Exeter Change, almost next door westward—the theatrical speculator was not idle. Dr. Arnold, the celebrated musical composer, without asking for a subsidy to support his operas, converted a portion of the structure into a theatre in 1794, but the two licensed and state-protected dogs-in-the-manger—Covent Garden and Drury Lane—who had the sole right

of playing the so-called "legitimate drama," and consequently rarely played it, opposed his license, and compelled him to retire from the speculation. Fifteen years afterwards his son, Samuel John Arnold, was more successful, and he obtained from the then Lord Chamberlain—the Earl of Dartmouth—the limited licenses then granted to the "minor theatres," that is, to all theatres except the privileged Covent Garden and Drury Lane. This infamous limitation compelled Mr. Arnold when he wanted to do "Macbeth" to break it into fragments, call it a "Burletta," and divide it with songs introduced with a piano on the stage. Macready, later on, wanted to take the theatre, but could do nothing with the authorities, and gave up the struggle with disgust, and his usual explosion of bad language. The patent monopoly was, however, doomed from that day. Macready combined with his friends, Sergeant Talfourd, Bulwer-Lytton, Charles Dickens and others, and in the thirties the infamous and paralysing patent monopoly, like the equally infamous window-tax, was sent howling to perdition.

The "English Opera House," as the Lyceum was called in its licensed theatrical shape, found a *Mascotte* in Miss Fanny Kelly. She was a charming woman—on and off the stage—a good singer and a better actress. She was courted by the best literary society of the period, and went to Paris with Charles and Mary Lamb, old Kenney, the dramatist, John Howard Payne, the author of "Clari, the Maid of Milan," and the song of "Home, Sweet Home," where they were well received by Talma, who had lived for some time in Soho. Tom Moore produced his one and only play—a comic opera—"M.P.; or, the Blue Stocking," at the old Lyceum, or English Opera House, which was pulled down, rebuilt on the same spot, and enlarged and re-opened in 1816. It always had had the best company attainable, and with Miss Kelly still at the head, it still adopted the same liberal policy. Its prices were not what are now called "popular," meaning cheap. The pit was three shillings, the galleries

two shillings and one shilling, and the boxes five shillings. There were no stalls in those days.

In 1817 Mr. Arnold tried a curious experiment, which, during the last ten or fifteen years, has been tried again amongst the more or less "gaff" houses in the east and north of London. It is known now as the "two houses-a-night" system. The performances were divided into two distinct parts, so that there might be two audiences on the same evening. Each performance consisted either of a three-act opera, or of a short opera and a ballet. The first performance began at six o'clock and lasted till nine. The second began at half-past nine o'clock and ended about midnight. Though Catherine Street in those days was the centre of "Life in London"—filled with supper-rooms and "resorts" and peopled by the "Dandies" and their hangers-on—the Lyceum experiment was not a success, unlike the midnight farce in later days at the Haymarket, but it undoubtedly paved the way for "half-price at nine o'clock."

In 1818 Charles Mathews the elder commenced his famous one-man entertainments with "Mail-Coach Adventures," and made a very remarkable contract, which, of course, was afterwards modified to enable Mathews to form an important unit in an important company. He was to play for seven years, Mr. Arnold receiving all the receipts and profits, and paying Mathews (the elder) an annuity of one thousand pounds a year.

Though the English "Opera House" had the finest all-round company in London, setting an example to the two protected monopolist theatres in the back streets, it had no officially-recognized status; it was hampered with molly-coddling regulations issued from the Stable Yard, St. James's; it had to dance its hornpipes in Court fetters—silken, but binding—and was essentially a variety theatre. Its miscellaneous programmes having been found popular and profitable, were copied by the two patent houses, who even went farther, borrowing rope-dancers from Vauxhall and wild beasts from

Cross's Strand Menagerie. This exposed the old original Lyceum to offers that may appear at the present day strange and degrading, but were matters of course in the early days of the century. Amongst these exhibitions was a sparring match carried on under the rules of the "Fives Court," at the side of the Haymarket Theatre, in which the Jew pugilist, Mendoza, immortalized by William Haslitt, was the leading actor. This attention paid to the Prize-Ring by the greatest dramatic critic of the nineteenth century accounts for the union of the Ring and the Stage in papers like the *Age* and the old *Era*. The stock company of the English Opera House, which stood on one side for Mendoza, comprised Miss Kelly, T. P. Cooke, Tyrone Power, Wrench, Harley, Wilkinson, Emery (Mrs. Cyril Maude's grandfather), Liston, Madame Vestris (the daughter of Bartolozzi), Miss Love, Miss Stephens, Mrs. C. Jones, Miss Chester, Miss Goward (afterwards Mrs. Keeley) and the elder Mathews — then called Charles Mathews, as *our* "Charley" had not then appeared on the theatrical horizon. Its "variety" shows were not confined to Mendoza's exhibitions of the "noble art" or Mr. Winser's explanations of his new system of lighting by gas, which he got introduced to Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Astley's and the Lyceum in 1817-18. Coal-gas was originally used as in Pall Mall, but the proprietors of Covent Garden thought to improve upon this by using oil-gas, with the result that in November, 1828, an explosion of their chief meters caused the house to be closed for nearly three weeks, and the company was driven into the arms of the hated and persecuted English Opera House. This brought Edmund Kean into the Lyceum—with Charles Kemble, Miss Jarman and Miss Goward (Mrs. Keeley),—where he played "Shylock" and "Sir Giles Overreach." The theatre before this was not unfamiliar with the name of Kean—a certain Moses Kean, who was often confused with the great little Edmund. He was a brother of the great actor, and was decidedly versatile and clever. He was a

ventriloquist and "entertainer"—good at dramatic imitations, and was capable of sustaining a "one-man" show, which he often did at the English Opera House. He thought he was a dramatist, but he was mistaken. The father of Edmund and Moses, who belonged to the Jewish persuasion, was a working tailor in a small way of business, and the legends current at the time persisted in connecting the paternity of Edmund with the Careys, who had an acting booth at Bartle'my Fair (and other fairs), where the boy is said to have had his first general training. This was of the "variety" kind, as he was a good acrobat, a good dancer, ready to play harlequin, and a capable violinist.

Many pieces of importance for the time—a rather degraded time, although it was in the "palmy days of the drama"—were produced at the old Lyceum, the most interesting of which was the German opera of "*Der Freischütz*." The composer, Carl Maria von Weber, was living in Berners Street, where he died soon after, and his great work, now worshipped all over Europe, first smelt the footlights in the Strand, July 22nd, 1824. The original cast was as follows:—"Agnes," Miss Noel; "Ann," Miss Povey; "Witch of the Wolf's Glen," Mrs. Bryan; "Killian," Mr. Tayleure; "Ottocar," Mr. Baker; "Kuno," Mr. Bartley; "Rodolp," Mr. Braham; "Caspar," Mr. George Bennett; "Rollo," Mr. H. Phillips; and "Zamiel," Mr. T. P. Cooke, who had already established a demoniacal reputation in Mrs. Shelley's "*Frankenstein*" before the advent of O. Smith and the "Bottle Imp." Nearly six years after this the time came for the destruction of the old theatre, while it was occupied by a French company, which included Potier, Cloup and Laporte. It was often occupied by a French company. Frederic Lemaitre came over with Robert Macaire. The fire occurred February 26th, 1830; the house and much adjoining property was destroyed, and Mr. Arnold was not insured for a shilling. The only house at the Catherine Street end of Exeter Street saved

was the old Fountain Hotel—a tavern of the old Crown and Anchor, Clunn's, or Sablonnière type. Thirty-eight years afterwards it was bought and pulled down for the Gaiety Theatre.

The theatre was not rebuilt for nearly four years, the delay arising from certain important public alterations in the Strand—particularly the clearance of Cross's Menagerie, the construction of Burleigh Street, and the widening of Disraeli's favourite thoroughfare. The present theatre—the Lyceum—standing on the west side of the new street, the North Wellington Street slope, was at last opened with a triple bill, July 14th, 1834. Mr. Arnold was always a man for experiments; and in the summer of 1835 he offered the paying public light and cooling refreshments for nothing. This was certainly in advance of the "no fee" system. John Barnett's charming opera, the "Mountain Sylph," first saw the light at the then new and present Lyceum, after a trial trip at "Bravo Rouse's" Garden Theatre in the City Road, then called the "Eagle Tavern and Grecian Saloon," a music-hall as far as licenses and management went, and an elegant and well-conducted suburban opera-house in reality. Things have not advanced much since 1835, though it pleases many well-wishers of the drama of limited experience to think and say so. Working singers and actors had to have a training then, if only in booths and fairs, and, above all, they had to have a repertory much the same as Irving had when he came to London from the country. The Stage had no place then of any money value for well-drilled mediocrities who required two months rehearsal to qualify them for an important part in a piece which ought to have been as familiar to them as the "Lord's Prayer," or the "Ten Commandments."

The Lyceum was never a "lucky" theatre. It had more than its share of ups-and-downs. Its managements always seemed to live from hand to mouth. Early in its career its proprietors, the Arnold family, found that letting a theatre was a profitable investment, while working it was a very

speculative enterprise. They retired as managers and became landlords. They were wise in their generation. They never lacked a tenant. Mr. Penley, the provincial manager, produced a piece called "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu," in which the late Mrs. Stirling was the heroine; a farce called "Dark Deeds," and a melodrama called "The Silver Crescent." This was liberal fare, judged by the meagre repasts of to-day. Not content with this, Penley, after the second piece, threw open the stage and gave a promenade concert *à la* Musard. The public verdict was "No," and therefore exit Penley.

Balfe, the composer, next tried his hand, but was beaten. Promenade concerts were again introduced, but the theatre was too small and this form of amusement was a little before its time in England. In 1840 a commonwealth of actors and actresses from Covent Garden tried their 'prentice hands, but found that acting was far easier than management. Balfe was called in again, and introduced harmony but not prosperity. He foolishly called himself a fool for becoming the manager of an English Theatre; he might have added—without credit or capital. In theatrical matters there is nothing new under the sun—light. An Independent Theatre was started at the Lyceum, managed by a council called the "Syncretic Society." They had the valuable acting support of Phelps, Miss Warner and Elton. They hatched one egg—"Martinuzzi," an impossible tragedy even without the Lord Chamberlain's mutilations—and retired to roost, after many vain cacklings, within a month. Musard came back again with his fiddlers; then another commonwealth, under the nominal management of "Little Oxberry," followed Musard. Carter followed with his lions and tigers; and Jullien, the best promenade concert showman in the world, to whom the English public owe a debt of gratitude for giving them cheap music and every musical luxury for the universal shilling, following Carter, gave his first concerts. An amateur company—avowedly amateur—had a short innings; and next

came, once more, a circus performance. There was certainly no lack of "variety."

At Easter, 1844, Mr. and Mrs. Keeley undertook the management. They had the support of the best and lightest writers—Albert Smith, Mark Lemon, Charles Kenney, and others, and the friendly help of Charles Dickens. They carried on the theatre brilliantly for three years, but the financial "backer," Mr. Strutt, although the rent in those days was only £2,500 a year, was not satisfied, and the Keeleys gave place to Charles Mathews—our "Charley"—and his wife, Madame Vestris. The management was the most alert and intelligent that ever conducted a London theatre. It lasted eight years, and yet Mathews was considered volatile! It gave Planché permanent work, and, with the aid of Beverley, the great scenic artist, it invented "transformation scenes." This may or may not have been a benefit to the stage, but no matter. Good taste always reigned supreme, and there was no vulgarity in the outlay. The Lyceum had triple bills, quadruple bills, and even quintuple bills, and it varied these with dramas like the "Pride of the Market," which was in a dozen acts, and played the whole evening. The great *tour de force* that was made during this memorable management was the production of the "Game of Speculation"—an adaptation of Balzac's "Mercadet," which cannot be bettered. It was translated, adapted, rehearsed and acted in sixty hours—George Henry Lewes being the author. No other theatre, no other company, no other manager and no other author could have done it in the time and established such a "record." It beats horseracing.

Charles Mathews retired from management, but fortunately not from acting, in 1855. The theatre was "to let" for a short time. Madame Ristori came in with an Italian company; F. Gye followed with Italian opera; Charles Dillon had a long dramatic season, with Mr. J. L. Toole as his chief low comedian; and the Pyne and

Harrison Combination tried English Opera. Edmund Falconer followed the Opera Company, and brought the house back to drama, if only for a brief period; and Madame Celeste followed him.

Edmund Falconer again became manager for the second time, and during the exhibition year of 1862 made a great hit and much money with "Peep o' Day," an Irish revolutionary drama.

This brings us up to the management of Charles Fechter, which lasted for four years, and was second only in brilliancy to the reign of Charles Mathews. Allowing for a little French accent, Fechter was the finest romantic actor of the last half of the century. What financial assistance he wanted he got from his friend Charles Dickens, and not from Lady Coutts, as was generally supposed; and when he left England for America in 1867, he honourably paid back, in remittances from America, every farthing he had borrowed.

Successive managers were found in Mr. E. T. Smith, always ready to take any theatre, music-hall, or tavern anywhere, whose operations extended from the Alhambra to Her Majesty's Theatre and from Cremorne Gardens in Chelsea to a similar institution in Paris; Mr. Allerton, who tried a short season; and the Brothers Mansell, who had the theatre for six months and produced, very creditably, Hervé's opera-bouffe, "Chilpéric."

Colonel Bateman, the father of the Bateman children—a showman of the American type—was the next tenant, opening towards the close of 1870. His leading man was Irving, though he scarcely knew his value until after the production of "The Bells," which was, in a measure, forced upon the manager by the actor, and this began that long and brilliant tenancy of the Lyceum, which was soon transferred from Colonel Bateman to Irving. The history of that tenancy for twenty years or more shows how the theatre was rescued from a position in which it was passing every few months (with the exception of the Mathews and Fechter periods) from hand

to hand, and was governed or misgoverned by the policy of boxing the theatrical compass. That tenancy has added weight and dignity to the theatrical profession ; the theatre is admired at home and respected abroad, and has earned the proud position of being the leading theatre of London. All this has been done without State or municipal subsidy, and has proved, if such an obvious truism needed proof, that high commercial principle is the friend and not the enemy of art, when it is the moving spirit of managers who are scholars and gentlemen.

JOHN HOLLINGSHEAD.

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